

VZCZCXRO8753
PP RUEHDE RUEHDIR
DE RUEHDO #0417 1541204
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 021204Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY DOHA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7963
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHKK/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM 0041
RUEAWJL/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RBDHDZA/COMUSNAVCENT
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

C O N F I D E N T I A L DOHA 000417

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/02/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KAWC](#) [PTER](#) [KPAO](#) [SU](#) [QA](#)
SUBJECT: EX-GTMO DETAINEE SAMI AL-HAJJ SEES HERO'S WELCOME
IN DOHA

REF: DOHA 153

Classified By: CDA MICHAEL A. RATNEY, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Former Al Jazeera cameraman Sami al-Hajj, recently released from Guantanamo, arrived in Doha with great fanfare on May 31 via a chartered Qatar Airways flight from Khartoum. Greeted by Al Jazeera Chairman Hamid bin Thamer al-Thani, members of the AJ Board of Directors, and hundreds of well-wishers, al-Hajj received more than an hour of live coverage on Al Jazeera's Arabic channel. He delivered a short speech in which he claimed to have endured torture at Guantanamo, and to have witnessed U.S. soldiers denigrating Islam. He also claimed that the USG pressured him to spy for it against Al Jazeera. Al-Hajj said he did not hate the American people, and that several Guantanamo guards had even "become friends." Al Jazeera officials said in public and in private that al-Hajj will remain an employee of Al Jazeera, but in a capacity yet to be determined. Post expects al-Hajj to become a poster child for Al Jazeera's much-flogged devotion to media freedom, and to appear frequently on the channel to discuss his experiences at Guantanamo. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) Sudanese citizen Sami al-Hajj, who had been imprisoned at Guantanamo for over six years after his arrest and transfer to U.S. custody on the Afghan-Pakistan border, arrived at Doha International Airport's ministerial lounge amid balloons, banners, cheering crowds, and a phalanx of cameras. Al-Hajj had been transferred from Guantanamo to Khartoum in May, an event that received prominent coverage by Al Jazeera and the Qatari press. During his May 31 arrival in Doha, where Al Jazeera's global headquarters is located, the network devoted more than one hour of live coverage on its main Arabic channel. Upon arrival and a welcome by senior Al Jazeera leaders, al-Hajj gave a short speech, in which he charged that he had endured "torture and inhumane treatment by those who call themselves a democratic people," and that the outpouring of support from well-wishers around the world was an indication of "support for freedom of speech and free journalism." Al Jazeera Managing Director Wadah Khanfar said al-Hajj's return was a "triumph of freedom."

¶3. (U) In his speech, al-Hajj also claimed that he had been interrogated 130 times, mostly relating to his work with Al Jazeera. He asserted that the USG had pressured him to work "as a spy" against the network. Asked by a British journalist if he harbored any hatred, al-Hajj smiled and asked in English, "For whom?" When the journalist responded, "the Americans," al-Hajj continued in Arabic, explaining that he held no ill will toward the American people, and that he had even befriended certain guards while in prison. The hardest thing to endure, he claimed was the way U.S. soldiers had denigrated Islam, forcing prisoners to break

their fasts during Raadan, and desecrating copies of the Quran.

4.(C) Local publications, all of which carried prominent coverage of al-Hajj, quoted Wadah Khanfar assaying that al-Hajj would remain an employee of Al Jazeera, but what role he would fulfill had not yet been determined. Satnam Matheru, Khanfar's chief of international relations, told PAO privately that Al Jazeera's leadership had "no idea" what they would do with al-Hajj and were "just happy to have him back" at this point.

15. (C) COMMENT: As noted reftel, it was only a matter of time before Al Jazeera took advantage of al-Hajj's release from Guantanamo to create a self-congratulatory media circus for its estimated 60 million viewers in the Arab world. Post expects Al Jazeera to use al-Hajj's experience at Guantanamo to further trumpet its claim to be the "voice of the oppressed" and to be fighting for the cause of media freedom in the face of threats, including from the United States, which Al Jazeera continues to accuse of targeting its journalists and bombing its bureaus in Iraq and Afghanistan. We expect to see al-Hajj frequently on Al Jazeera talking about Guantanamo, and possibly as the subject of a documentary that will be highly unflattering for the USG.

16. (U) Khartoum minimize considered.
RATNEY